DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 283 756 SO 018 209

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TITLE Writing in Large Geography Classes.
PUB DATE 84
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Geographic Education (Toronto, Ontario, Canada, October 1984).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Geography; *Geography Instruction; Higher Education; Instructional Materials; Social Sciences; *Social Studies; Writing Evaluation; *Writing Improvement; Writing Instruction; Writing Processes; Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

Ideas and techniques are presented to make the instructional task of teaching writing in a large geography class easier and more effective. One technique is to allow students to engage in pre-topic and post-topic writing. Before a new topic is discussed, the teacher asks the students to write for ten minutes on anything they know about the topic. The benefits of such a technique are that it sets students to thinking about the topic, helps to stimulate discussion, and allows the teacher to gauge the level of information in the class about the topic to be dealt with. This writing should be read but not graded by the instructor as that could stifle the free flow of expression. After a topic has been covered in class, students write again for ten minutes on the topic. They consolidate and reinforce information and allow the instructor to clarify any misconceptions students may have. Other techniques discussed are "sample" essays and journal writing. Using writing in content classes provides an effective tool for both the teaching of writing and learning the content of geography. (SM)

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Writing in Large Geography Classes

by

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Most teachers would concede that writing is somehow valuable -- a skill that should be encouraged in every classroom. Nevertheless, instructors often do not assign writing projects, in large part because it is assumed that too much of their time will be absorbed in responding to the work. In this paper, we hope to demonstrate that writing, even in a large class, can be an effective teaching tool without unreasonable time commitments.

In 1981 Northern Kentucky University, where we both teach, was given a NEH grant to develop what is known as a Writing Across the Disciplines program. One author of this paper (Mary Ann Weiss) is a member of the Literature and Language department and has been involved with promoting the program. The other author (Edwin T. Weiss,Jr.) is on the geography faculty and is one of the recipients of the program's efforts. The main thrust of the program has been a series of workshops led by nationally recognized leaders in the writing field such as Toby Fulweiler, Lee Odell and Donald Murray. The ideas presented here are a reflection of their thinking and that of our director of composition, Judith Bechtel, whose new book Improving Writing and Learning: A Handbook for Teachers in Every Class has recently been published.

There are two main premises upon which this paper is based. One is that students learn while writing--not just how to write, but also about the content of the writing. The second is that writing can be useful as a

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learning tool even if it does not go to a finely crafted stage.

That finely crafted product is what we have traditionally sought in academia because we have viewed writing primarily as a communication skill rather than as a tool for discovery. In other words, we ask students to write primarily to confirm what they have already learned and to communicate to the teacher what they, the students, know. The modes most frequently used to determine a student's grasp of course content are the essay exam and the research paper. These tasks can be useful, but while accomplishing them, a great deal of student effort goes into creating a polished product, and a great deal of instructor effort goes into agonizing over the quality of that product. We contend that placing more emphasis on informal writing tasks would reduce the amount of time instructors need to spend evaluating writing, would eventually improve the quality of student writing, and most importantly, would help students learn more effectively.

Most composition classes are now teaching writing as a process. When writing a paper, the importance of each step--pre-writing, tentative drafts, revision and final proofreading--is stressed. All of the stages are important. In our mind, however, those early steps are especially significant because they are where questions are asked, summarizing takes place, associations among ideas are made, and creative thoughts are tentatively put forth.

In other words, we believe in the importance of these early stages of the writing process, where ideas develop and most learning takes place. Janet Emig conducted some of the seminal research in this area in the 1970's in which she found that the act of writing led beyond mere memorization to understanding--selecting and reconnecting material, digesting it and translating it into one's own meaning and words. We suspect that we all take pen to paper when we want to discover what we

know, to explore where we are and where we are going on a particular project. However, we don't immediately produce a splendid piece of writing, but instead explore our subject--rambling, scribbling, searching--simply placing whatever we know on the subject on paper. There seems to be a link between simply writing down a thought and absorbing that thought into the mind. As we write, connections are made and retention takes place. Students can dig into the inner reaches of their minds for information they didn't know they already had.

What we would like to advocate here, therefore, is the use of numerous (the quantity of writing for a particular class may actually increase) writing projects that are less formal, projects that often do not go to a perfected state. This informal writing has been classified as "expressive" writing by the British researcher James Britton. Expressive writing is generally written for oneself, that is , the writer is his or her own audience. It is informal, natural sounding. It may be full of mechanical errors such as ridiculous spellings, sentence fragments and repetitious ramblings. It is often speculative, and takes on a quality of talking to oneself. It is writing that expresses what one is considering, rather than communicating what one is sure of. Eventually such writing leads to more organized and insightful formal writing, or as Britton would catergorize it, transactional writing. Britton contends that most good transactional or poetic writing begins with expressive writing.

The most common forms of expressive writing are journal entries, short focused writing, response papers and free writings. Most important for our purposes here today, expressive writing is performed in order to speculate, to explore connections, to integrate the new with that which is known. Expressive writing is releasing. It makes the writer feel free to explore ideas because it is not to be evaluated in the sense that it is graded. It

can be counted, however, mostly on the basis of sheer quantity.

We will now discuss in more detail how writing -particularly expressive writing- can be used in large geography classes. For the reasons outlined above, we assume that writing per se is beneficial. Nevertheless, it is an academic fact of life that instructors in large sections frequently do not have the time or energy to plow through dozens and dozens of papers on a regular basis. We hope to demonstrate, however, that writing can still be incorportated into large geography sections without adding much work for the instructor.

The informal writing technique most frequently used in classes at Northern Kentucky University involves having the class write for ten minutes or so on a topic that has not yet been introduceed in class. For example, in a world regional geography class, the students might be asked to write what they know about Africa -- what essential information might be conveyed to a visitor from another planet who knew nothing about that area. The students are urged to write about anything relating to Africa, without being overly concerned with grammar, structure, spelling, etc. They are also urged to "keep writing," even when they have nothing to say. It is made clear to them that these efforts will be read but not be graded. It is useful if the instructor writes at the same time that the students are doing this, or any other, in-class writing exercise.

The benefits of this technique are numerous. First, it gets the class thinking about the topic that is about to be discussed, and thus makes subsequent lectures and readings somewhat more meaningful and, perhaps, more interesting. To some extent, this pre-topic writing also stimulates in-class discussion-- students who thought they knew nothing at all about the topic discover that at least they have an opinion, and perhaps some information regarding the issues under consideration. When done early in a

course, these in-class writings can help identify those students that might have serious writing or learning problems. Prompt remedial action can then be taken, (such as sending them to the writing center). Conversely, the bright student who is a shrinking violet might be identified and brought into class discussion. These pre-topic writings also help an instructor gauge the level of information and understanding that a class has before a topic is dealt with, thus giving some guidelines for future lectures as well as helping to identify specific points of misinformation that can be corrected in class.

Similar to pre-discussion writing is post-discussion writing. This is writing that is generally done in class in response to a question or questions asked about material just covered. The purpose of this form of writing is to consolidate and reinforce material while it is still fresh in the students' minds. It also may help expose poorly understood areas or concepts to the students and encourages them to take prompt remedial action. Finally, if the writing is collected and read by the instructor, misunderstandings may be revealed (and corrected) before a totally new topic is introduced.

A somewhat different type of writing is what might be called the "sample essay" type of writing. This method usually takes a bit longer than the pre- and post-topic writing just discussed, and can take place either after a particular topic has been discussed, or in preparation for an upcoming exam. The benefit of this type of writing is that it gives the student some idea about the sort of question that might be asked on an exam, and thus encourages more effective studying. It provides an opportunity to practice answering an essay question. It helps reinforce past material, and helps students identify areas of fuzzy thinking or incomplete information. Like the pre-topic writing, these practice esaays are not graded, nor is it

essential that they even be read by the instructor. A variant of this approach is to have the class members write a sample essay, and then have other members of the class grade and comment on the answers. This is best done anonymously, perhaps by using social security numbers. Another variant on the sample essay writing assignment is to break the class into groups of four or five students each who will discuss the question before writing; the answers can then be collected and one or two copied and redistributed to the whole class; this will facilitate specific discussion about how the question might best be answered.

Another variety of writing that is commonly used in both large and small classes in many disciplines is journal writing, a form of writing that involves students keeping a portfolio of writings of all sorts- writing that reflects on topics discussed in class; reaction writing to reading that has been assigned; writing that reflects on the students' personal experiences or public events that relate to class material. These journals may be graded as to the quality of their content; this is, however, extremely time consuming. A more reasonable approach is to grade the journals only on quantity, under the assumption that more is generally better; if this seems too crude, another alternative is to ask the students to identify the best five (or whatever) items in their journals to be graded. Another alternative is to require journal writing, and simply check to see that the writing has been done, without evaluating it further.

Finaly, when assigning a research paper or some other out-of-class project, it can be useful to start off with an in-class free write on the topic just to get students thinking about the project. While the students are writing, the instructor can suggest directions to explore. This serves as a kind of brainstorming and can help turn up possible avenues for investigation.

Conclusion It is our contention that writing in geography classes- or virtually any class- provides an effective vehicle not only for the teaching of writing, but also for the teaching of geography. The subject material is understood more thoroughly, and complex issues are analyzed in greater depth. Students tend to become more interested in the material, in part because they understand it better, in part because some variety is given from the "day in and day out" lecture format that is so often the rule. It makes teaching and learning a bit more fun. Of course, this greater depth of understanding is purchased at the price of lecture time and "substantive material", but we would contend that greater understanding is far more important than more information, and that it is a price well worth paying.

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